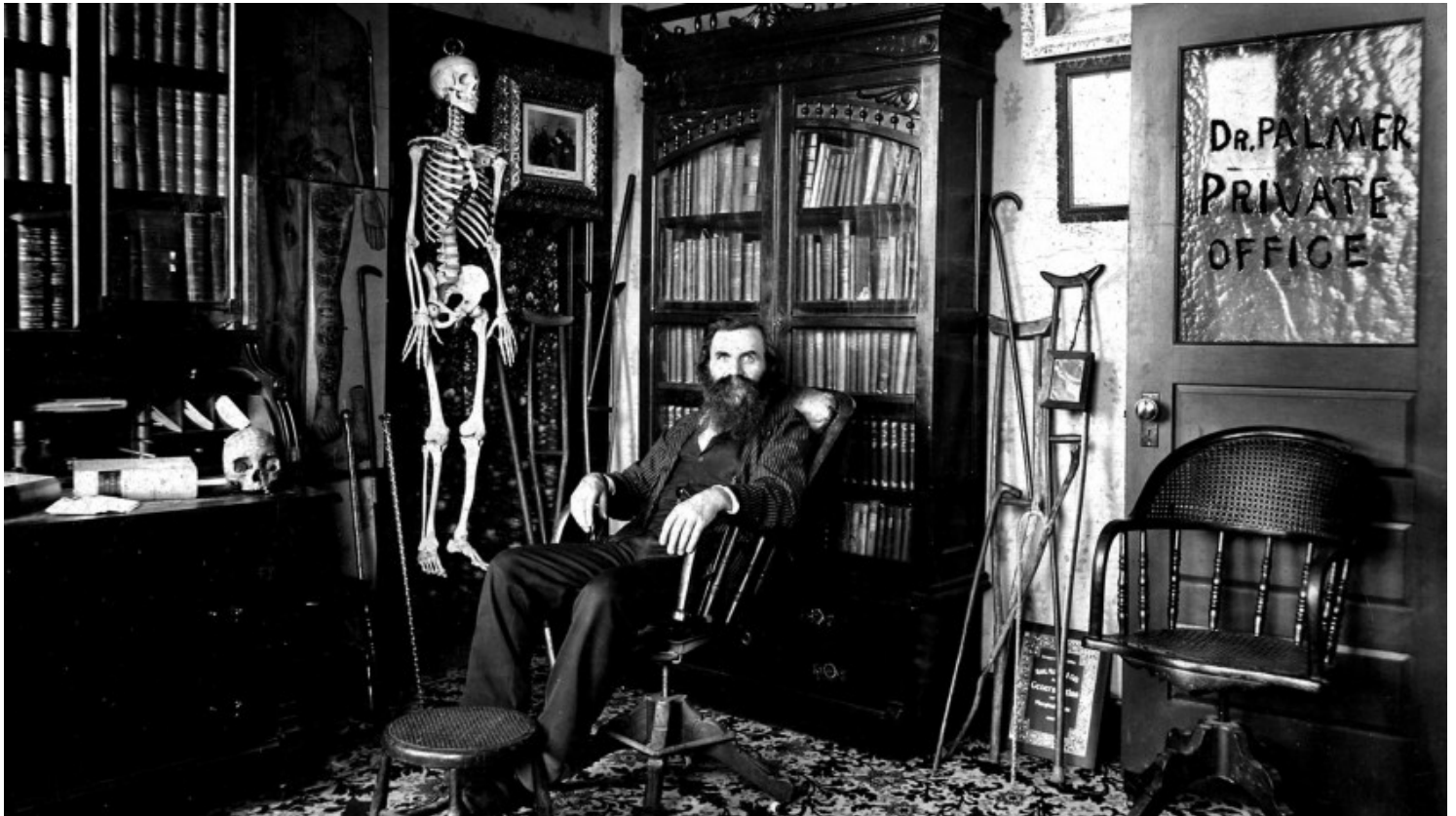




Column: Chiropractic treatment, a \$15-billion industry, has its roots in a ghost story



D.D. Palmer, who performed the first chiropractic adjustment in 1895, credited the ghost of a long-dead doctor with introducing him to the healing practice. (Courtesy of Palmer College of Chiropractic)

By DAVID LAZARUS
BUSINESS COLUMNIST

JUNE 30, 2017
3 AM

The American Chiropractic Assn. estimates that the nation's roughly 77,000 chiropractors treat more than 35 million Americans every year.

I suspect most if not all those patients have no idea that the \$15-billion chiropractic industry owes its existence to a ghost.

Daniel David Palmer, the “father” of chiropractic who performed the first chiropractic adjustment in 1895, was an avid spiritualist. He maintained that the notion and basic principles of chiropractic

treatment were passed along to him during a seance by a long-dead doctor.

“The knowledge and philosophy given me by Dr. Jim Atkinson, an intelligent spiritual being ... appealed to my reason,” Palmer wrote in his memoir “The Chiropractor,” which was published in 1914 after his death in Los Angeles. Atkinson had died 50 years prior to Palmer’s epiphany.

Before learning of spinal adjustments from a supernatural entity, Palmer spent nine years as a practitioner of what was known as “magnetic healing,” in which he would diagnose and cure ailments by manipulating a magnetic field surrounding the patient’s body.

I bring all this up because I saw a chiropractor the other day — my first visit as a patient after having written [a number of columns](#) questioning the qualification of chiropractors to treat diabetes, which is a growing trend in the industry.

My wife insisted that I go after my car was rear-ended while I was driving on the 101 from Hollywood to downtown. My car’s in worse shape than I am. I came away from the accident with a stiff neck.

It was while I was lying on my back in the chiropractor’s office awaiting his healing touch that two thoughts crossed my mind.

First: Why do chiropractors get to call themselves doctors? They’re clearly not doctors, lacking both the extensive training and prescription-writing ability of a medical doctor. Yet to a lay person, it may be hard to distinguish between the two professions when they share a common (and highly prestigious) title.

Second: While the therapeutic benefits of a spinal adjustment seem undeniable — you *do* come away from a session feeling refreshed — why does what is basically physical therapy have to be wrapped up in so much pseudoscience and possible quackery?

Modern chiropractors focus primarily on the spinal column, seeking “misalignments” that might affect joints, muscles, nerves and organs. The basic idea is to restore a sense of balance to the body and help it heal naturally.

In recent years, some chiropractors have sought to expand their practices by claiming expertise in diabetes, neuropathy and other chronic conditions.

My chiropractic session included an examination using what's called a static surface electromyography device, a.k.a. surface EMG or static sEMG. What that means is that electrodes were held at specific spots along my spine.

This produced an impressive-looking readout in which colored bars (green and blue good, red and black bad) were assigned to different parts of my neck and back.

That readout, in turn, served as the basis of subsequent discussions with the chiropractor and his assistant, the crux of which was that I'd need at least 12 more sessions at a cost of nearly \$800, with a modest discount available for paying the entire amount upfront.

Surface EMG technology has been around for a while. It's used to measure electrical activity. I was told at the chiropractor's office no fewer than three times that the technology "is used by NASA," which clearly was meant to allay any suspicions I might have.

"I don't trust it," said Fred Lerner, a Beverly Hills chiropractor and past chairman of the California Board of Chiropractic Examiners, the state regulatory agency. He told me he doesn't use a surface EMG machine at his practice and is wary of colleagues who do.

"You'll have two different examiners and they'll get two different results," Lerner said. "The findings aren't reproducible."

I spoke with David Marcarian, who helped develop surface EMG systems while working for NASA's Ames Research Center and is now president of a Seattle company called Precision Biometrics. He said his privately held firm's [MyoVision](#) device dominates the market for surface EMG machines in chiropractic offices.

Marcarian acknowledged that, because of his background as a NASA researcher, some chiropractors claim that surface EMG machines play a prominent role in the space program. In fact, he said, NASA uses the technology only to test other diagnostic equipment, not the well-being of astronauts.

“The main reason static surface EMG has such a bad reputation is because so many chiropractors misuse the data,” Marcarian said. “Unscrupulous chiropractors use it to scare people into becoming patients.”

The main reason static surface EMG has such a bad reputation is because so many chiropractors misuse the data.

DAVID MARCARIAN, WHO HELPED DEVELOP SURFACE EMG SYSTEMS AT NASA

As for chiropractors enjoying the titular benefits of “doctor,” Robert Puleo, executive officer of the state Board of Chiropractic Examiners, told me the practice dates back to 1922, when the state passed the [Chiropractic Initiative Act](#).

It laid the groundwork for regulation of the industry and has remained largely unchanged for nearly a century.

“It explicitly allows them to call themselves doctors, as long as they don’t claim to be medical doctors,” Puleo said.

This apparently was very important to early chiropractic practitioners, whose beliefs were somewhat at odds with established medicine.

D.D. Palmer, the founder of chiropractic, [described the practice](#) as “an educational, scientific, religious system” that “imparts instruction relating both to this world and the one to come.” In his 1914 memoir, he made the case that chiropractors should be permitted to treat patients on religious-freedom grounds.

“The Constitution of the United States and the statutes personal of California confer upon me and all persons of chiropractic faith the inalienable right to practice our religion without restraint or hindrance,” Palmer wrote.

Prior to passage of the 1922 law, Puleo said, “California chiropractors were being thrown in jail. They were being accused of practicing medicine without a license.”

Being granted the legal right to call themselves doctors conferred upon chiropractors instant legitimacy as medical professionals.

Puleo said his office is “largely complaint-driven,” meaning that it responds to complaints filed by patients but typically isn’t out in the field looking for violations of the law. “Unless we get complaints, there’s not much we can do,” Puleo said.

He advised patients to approach chiropractors with their eyes open, watchful for any claims that may seem far-fetched. The board’s website allows people to [search state records](#) to make sure a chiropractor is licensed and see if there have been any disciplinary actions.

I mentioned earlier that Palmer credited a ghost with introducing him to the basics of the calling. As such, it seemed only fair that I allow the American Chiropractic Assn. to address the industry’s otherworldly origins.

William Lauretti, an associate professor at New York Chiropractic College who serves as an association spokesman, admitted that “D.D. Palmer was an eccentric.”

However, Lauretti assured me that consultations with supernatural beings “is not something that’s part of the modern chiropractic profession.”

Good to know. Still, when the chiropractor who examined me called Wednesday to book my next session, I declined. I said my neck’s feeling better.

I didn’t bother mentioning that I’ve had the Casper the Friendly Ghost [theme song](#) playing in my head for days.

[David Lazarus](#)’ column runs Tuesdays and Fridays. He also can be seen daily on KTLA-TV Channel 5 and followed on Twitter [@Davidlaz](#). Send your tips or feedback to david.lazarus@latimes.com.

ALSO

[Reagan was right: Senate healthcare bill proves government is the problem](#)

Recipe for disaster: How not to cook up healthcare reform

Trump's answer to the obesity epidemic: Here, have a cookie



David Lazarus

David Lazarus is an award-winning business columnist for the Los Angeles Times, focusing on consumer affairs. He also appears daily on KTLA-TV Channel 5 and is a part-time radio host. His work appears in newspapers across the country and has resulted in a variety of laws protecting consumers.

MOST READ



- 1 Andrew Yang faces his critics in the Asian American community
- 2 Judge rips into Trump Education chief Betsy DeVos over student debt
- 3 Commentary: What works, what's missing and what needs fixing at Disney's Galaxy's Edge
- 4 Why Republicans may want a House vote on impeachment inquiry and Pelosi doesn't
- 5 Supreme Court allows blind people to sue retailers if their websites are not accessible

Subscribe for unlimited access

Copyright © 2019, Los Angeles Times | [Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)